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Matthew Knox

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The Pleasure of Unrequited Architecture

Matthew Knox

Is not the most erotic portion of a body where the garment gapes?
—Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*

Architecture is about desire. A partially-clothed body, a structure, standing in the light. Desired regions are hidden by fragments of shadow draping like cloth. You want to see more but the shadows reveal only your imagination. The unveiling of desired regions is denied by the shadows; only your thought can expose the hidden.¹ There is pleasure in this thoughtful refusal of appearance, like something I remember as a child. When I would want or desire something, I would think about it for days, even months, in anticipation, yet its fruition never matched the pleasure of the anticipation, the desire.

Desire is also at play in architecture because architecture desires for com-

pletion, for appearance. Without desire there would be no structure, no light. Desire is a beginning that may or may not be completed. The desired is hidden by its own darkness, yet a pleasure forms in the anticipation of the unexposed. From this unfulfillment, desire, and beginnings, I propose an unrequited² architecture—an architecture that is elicited (imagined) directly from drawings, models and texts to be realized in the mind. Unrequited architecture is always elusive and mindful, never appearing to the light, yet therein lies the pleasure.

Unrequited architecture is simply about the pleasure of envisaged architecture—architecture that remains beyond physical experience deriving its pleasure by desires unfulfilled. Unrequited architecture may never be physical but its presence is felt completely in thoughts. This, then, is not

an affirmation to the act of building or a denial of architectures built, in fact these are necessary as referent images. Instead, unrequited architecture affirms those architectures that are drawn, written, modeled and imagined—fictive constructs that are no less real as inhabitations of thought.

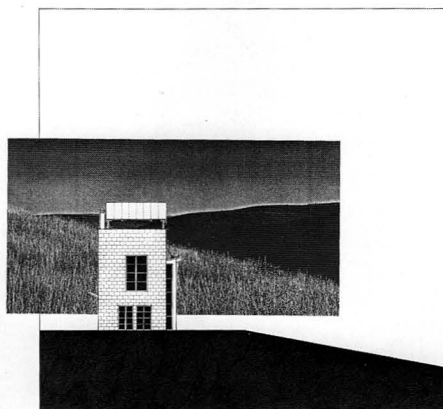
The Act of Unrequited Architecture

I propose that for an understanding of unrequited architecture, the longing for completion in the making of architecture must be reconsidered. Architecture can not be a closed linear structure finding fulfillment only in the normative materialization of construction. Rafael Moneo said that once the construction of a building is finished, it assumes its own reality.³ Unrequited architecture proceeds a built reality. It is, therefore, an internal act wanting only the impetus of the drawing, the model or the text.

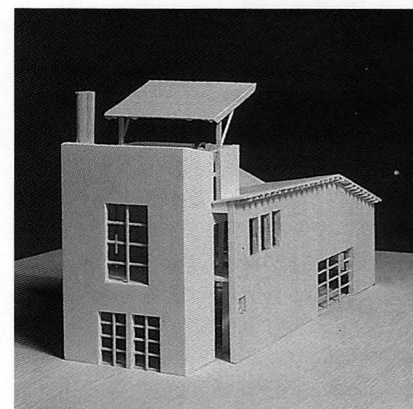
Needing no external reference or ambitions beyond these to be legitimate, it is an open-ended affair without a clear conclusion. Pleasure is in the ambiguities of acting.

This quixotic acting is necessary to the pleasure of unrequited architecture. When thoughtful desire engages the architectural object, there is no physical possession of the body or structure. There is, however, a connection in the mind by the act of thinking. Indeed, active thinking is intrinsically unrequited architecture. For example, when I look at architectural drawings and models, they are “specifically real” in the way that they are real lines on paper or real material.⁴ They are “representations of proposed comings” that are to be consummated.⁵ Yet, by thinking, such precursory images become more complete—they arrive. I can inhabit these imagined forms not by

Part 1: An Image. I was a child then. The daydream was always the same. A solitary tree standing in the grass beneath an incredible sky. The heat and the colors seemed like a Hopper painting in their intensity. Two people are having a picnic beneath the canopy, their bicycles lying in the grass beside them. They are happy, a man and a woman; you can tell by the silent laughter.



Part 2: Remembering. I remember the room of my childhood. A place where dreams of unknown places and deep thoughts filled the stillness late at night. Now I inhabit that place in my thought—thought that can be constructed.



the passive insertion of my body into concrete structures, but by the active desire of my thoughts constructing architectural forms.

The active thinking of unrequited architecture is analogous to reading. When reading, my body aches in anticipation as the words unveil moments of life. I connect with the text and feel alive.⁶ In anticipation, my mind is rushing forward. It holds me to the unfolding moments because I am the instrument of their becoming. This active participation implies a concentration, or thoughtful involvement that need not be present in the experience of built architectures. There is no heed paid to the effort and thought in a built work. Any sense of construction, mental or material, may be absent because the building exists independent of me. Unrequited architecture escapes the narrowness of passivity by

requiring total engagement with the work and the thought within in order for it to become. Thinking balances process with perception.

The balance of process with perception is more apparent if the role of drawing is understood within the construct of unrequited architecture. Drawings are pure markings of thought, untainted by outside forces; they are a direct projection (psychological) of the architect. Drawings are in fact necessary to unrequited architecture, because they set up the unveiling; without them, nothing is hidden.⁷ If, then, these drawings were to become a physical construction they would, as Moneo says, assume their own life and achieve a "solitude."⁸ However, by avoiding this condition of constructional disconnection, representations of thoughts, incomplete on paper, may be completed in the

mind by the architect or anyone who so desires. One can consider this a transcendence of Plato's idea of the idea. By beginning with an abstract idea (a house for example) and then constructing a concrete image of that idea on paper,⁹ the idea becomes a "specific reality" in drawing, model and text. Unrequited architecture then transcends this state and lingers in the pleasure of the abstract idea spawned by the concrete images.

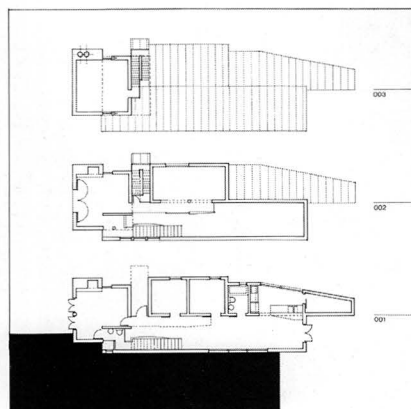
Mise-en-scène

One of the most interesting aspects of an architectural life is that it is unresolved regardless of any efforts to frame its every moment. The unknown and unexpected appear unheralded. Analogically, unrequited architecture unfolds a pleasure found in the non-reality of establishing a frame around order that simplifies the complexity of life. No edges are left exposed to prag-

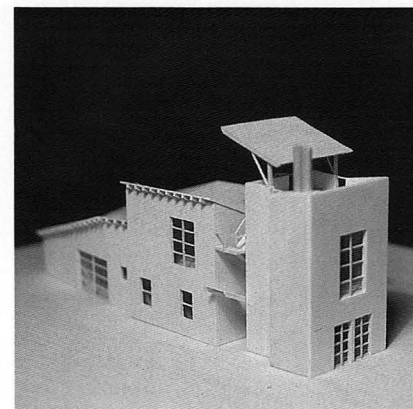
matic abrasions.¹⁰ You know exactly what it is and for a moment can easily affirm it. The architect Rodolfo Machado expresses this similarly using fiction as the frame to make the "...reader desire that which has been imagined."¹¹ He imagines scenes, and then using words, drawings and models, creates a fiction challenging the imagination to inhabit. Through careful construction of the scene, a thoughtful clarity unknown to the required architecture can exist.

The filmic experience is an excellent example of this framing. The film "Cinema Paradiso" by Giuseppe Tornatore, begins with the camera frame lingering as it peers out over a balcony, a body of water in the distance. The camera slowly pulls back to reveal a second frame formed by open doors. As the movement continues, a table appears. And what began as a simple

Part 3: Pictures and Words. There was a screen. It projected images of places, fictions and immediate realities. Here there were no walls, only transcendent space. And then there were the books—did I mention the books? I read them all, losing myself in places crafted by words and inhabited by my thoughts.



Part 4: Winds. We had an old recording in our house filled with the sounds of a wood-masted sailboat sailing some distant ocean. I wanted so badly to climb that unknown mast with its full white sails and await the horizon—feeling the wind and motion.



framing of foreground, middle and background is now re-framed. This nested frame becomes a *mise-en-scène* of the film itself—everything is present in that initial moment. More explicitly, through re-framing, the narrative structure of the film is exposed and becomes apparent later when the main character, in a sleepless night, will re-frame and reveal his life for us.

I love this reversal of what was unresolved and realistically indeterminate, becoming ordered by the camera frame. Through the lens the main character constructs a structure out of his memory; he rewinds his life. Similarly, unrequited architecture allows the re-framing of architectural moments. Through thinking, a new reality in the mind begins—a reality that began with drawings models and texts, entities denied “solitude” and existing incompletely. And because of this incompleteness, the

conceived reality may always be returned to and constructed anew. Like the re-reading of a book or the re-watching of a film, this is not like the one-take of life.

The Architecture in My Head

Consider the images on these pages. The text begins by painting a landscape for the house to form—a tree, the green grass, an incredible sky. The text continues, as if dreaming, images and forms begin to be constructed. The text, the drawing and the model serve as fodder to further the envisaged reality. Like a passage to a distant place, thought transcends the realness of the paper with desire. The images, thoughtful topography, emerge to be inhabited, to be lived. Unrequited architecture is nothing more, simply a moment of architecture.

Not the Final Scene

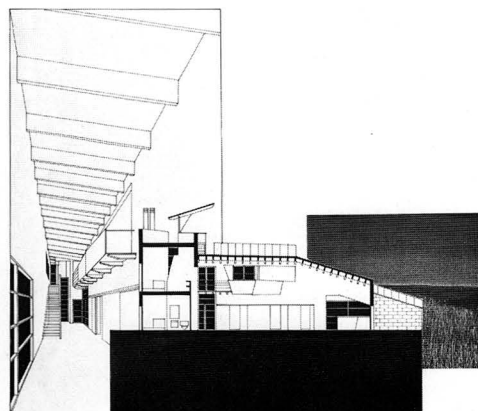
I love unrequited architecture for what it is not. Unlike other architectures, it

is not here and it has not culminated. The drawings, words and models of unrequited architecture are never enough but that is the pleasure. It is like a book or a film. At any time, you can step into a scene and for a moment, life has clarity. A lucidity constructed by the instrumental resolution of the thoughtful frame. Indeed, unrequited architecture is dependent on thought for only the solitude of the mind can provide its landscape. Consider what Charles Simic said about reading philosophy: “Whoever reads philosophy reads himself as much as he reads the philosopher.”¹² This is not unlike the exchange between the text, drawings, models and the mind in unrequited architecture. But in the end, perhaps I love unrequited architecture simply because it is not the fulfilling of a desire but the beginning of a new desire.¹³

Notes

1. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 10.
2. “Unrequited adj. 1. not returned or reciprocated: unrequited love.”... “3. not repaid or satisfied.” *Random House Dictionary*, Second Unabridged Ed., p. 2084.
3. Rafael Moneo, *The Solitude of Buildings*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 1986), p. 16.
4. John Hedjuk, *Mask of Medusa*, ed. Kim Shkapich (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1985), p. 69.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
6. Barthes, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
7. Barthes, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
8. Moneo, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
9. Mark Wigley, “The Architectural Displacement of Philosophy: Form Being and Absence,” *The Pratt Journal of Architecture*, II (1988), p. 8.
10. Barthes, *op. cit.*, p. 11.
11. Rodolfo Machado, “Fictions on Fictions,” *Via*, VIII (1986) p. 87.
12. Charles Simic, “Reading Philosophy at Night,” *The Best American Essays 1988*, ed. Annie Dillard (New York: Triclonor & Fields, 1988), p. 309.
13. John Lobell, *Between Silence and Light: Spirit in the Architecture of Louis Kahn* (Boston: Shambhalha Publications, Inc., 1979), p. 66.

Part 5: Sounds. Outside my window was a drain pipe. I never thought about it except on hot summer nights when the thunder would roll in. Soon the ubiquitous pipe would be filled with torrents of water. And even after the storm was long past, I could still hear it dripping down from the roof.



Part 6: Thought Transformed. The beginning occurs by building within the dream from a room, thinking late into the night. In a room above me I can see and feel the other places, the house itself trailing like a wake behind. Above me still is the sky—wings of an angel—translucent and clear. I must see the sky from my house to watch the angels fall.

